



The Appointment of the Syrian Regime, Involved in Crimes against Humanity, to the WHO's Executive Board Represents the Greatest Insult to the Organization and All Its Staff and Members

The Syrian Regime Has Carried Out 544 Attacks on Medical Facilities, Killed 652 Medical Personnel, and Arrested/Disappeared 3,329 Others to Date

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. Background on the World Health Organization:

We note that the information provided on the World Health Organization (WHO) website about the organization's structure and the mechanism used for selecting its Executive Board members is not organized in a clear way as is the case with, for instance, the Human Rights Council website, forcing us to expend excessive effort to obtain basic information on the organization which should be made available to the public more clearly and coherently.

WHO Structure:

The WHO, which is a United Nations agency, specifically the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations, is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters. The number of WHO member states is 194, with the organization's work supervised by: the World Health Assembly, the Executive Board, and the Secretariat.

1- World Health Assembly:

The [Assembly](#) holds an annual meeting at the WHO headquarters in Geneva in May every year and may hold special sessions if necessary. The World Health Assembly approves the organization's program and budget for a period of two years and decides on the most important issues of public policy. During its meetings, the General Assembly forms committees to carry out the organization's work, with two main committees emerging from the General Assembly (**Committee A** and **Committee B**), in addition to a general committee:

Committee A: Deals predominantly with programme and budget matters.

Committee B: Deals predominantly with administrative, financial and legal matters.

The General Committee: One of this committee's most important tasks is to decide the time and place of the Assembly's meetings and sessions, both annual and special, and of the sessions of the main committees and their places of convening, in addition to determining the order of business in all meetings of the Health Assembly, as well as the time and place of the meetings of the committees it established, and coordinating the work of the main committees and other committees established by the Assembly. The General Committee is composed of 25 members:

- The President and Vice-Presidents of the Health Assembly;
- Chairmen of the two main committees of the Health Assembly;

The quorum of the Committee is completed by representatives of Member States elected by the World Health Assembly during its annual meeting.

2- The Executive Board:

The Executive Board is composed of [34 members](#), each of whom is elected for a three-year term. The annual Board meeting is held in January, during which the members agree upon the agenda for the World Health Assembly and the resolutions to be considered by the Health Assembly. A second shorter meeting takes place in May, as a follow-up to the annual Health Assembly meeting. The 34 members of the Board are chosen in a way that achieves a regional balance. The following document lists the current members of the Executive Board:



Under Article 28 of the organization's constitution¹, the functions of the Executive Board are as follows:

- (a) to give effect to the decisions and policies of the Health Assembly;
- (b) to act as the executive organ of the Health Assembly;
- (c) to perform any other functions entrusted to it by the Health Assembly;
- (d) to advise the Health Assembly on questions referred to it by that body and on matters assigned to the Organization by conventions, agreements and regulations;
- (e) to submit advice or proposals to the Health Assembly on its own initiative;
- (f) to prepare the agenda of meetings of the Health Assembly;
- (g) to submit to the Health Assembly for consideration and approval a general programme of work covering a specific period;
- (h) to study all questions within its competence;
- (i) to take emergency measures within the functions and financial resources of the Organization to deal with events requiring immediate action.

3- The Secretariat:

The Secretariat shall comprise the Director-General and such technical and administrative staff as the Organization may require.

¹ World Health Organization, Basic Documents, Constitution of the World Health Organization, Article 28, p.9, https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/pdf_files/BD_49th-en.pdf

II. The Mechanism Through Which the Syrian Regime Was Elected as a Member of the WHO Executive Board:

The General Committee, by secret ballot, draws up a list consisting of at most 15 Members and at least the same number of Members as the number of seats to be filled, and submits this list to the World Health Assembly, which elects the candidates to fill the seats in the Board to be filled.

On May 24, 2021, the World Health Assembly [elected](#) Mrs. Dechen Wangmo (Bhutan) as the President, and Professor Benjamin Hounkpatin (Benin), Mr. Enkhbold Sereejav (Mongolia), Dr. Hanan Al Kuwari (Qatar), Mr. Tunel Keck (Estonia), Dr. Amelia Flores (Guatemala) as Vice-Presidents, as well as electing the Chairmen of Committees A and B, after which it elected the following 17 countries to complete the quorum of the General Committee:

The United States of America, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, France, Canada, Russian Federation, China, Portugal, Cuba, Philippines, Chile, Burundi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Algeria, Djibouti, and Oman.

During the meeting of the General Committee in the session held on May 26, 2021, a list of 12 Member States [was nominated](#) to fill the available seats on the Executive Board at its 149th session, which are:

Afghanistan, Belarus, Denmark, France, Japan, Malaysia, Paraguay, Peru, Rwanda, Slovenia, Syria, and East Timor.

On Friday, May 28, 2021, [during the meeting of the World Health Assembly](#), none of the representatives of the Member States objected to the list of candidate countries, leading to its adoption without a ballot, as it is possible to adopt a candidate or a list of candidates without a ballot in the event that there is no objection under Rule 80 of the Assembly's rules of procedure². The fact that none of the representatives of Member States, especially those representing liberal democratic countries, objected to the presence of the Syrian regime on the list of candidates is reprehensible in the extreme.

The World Health Organization had previously supported the Syrian regime through the use of Cham Wings Airlines, which has been involved in supporting the Syrian regime's violations and transporting Russian mercenaries to Syria, in transferring a quantity of medical supplies related to the humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had been stored in the organization's warehouses in Dubai, to Benghazi Airport in Libya, according to news published by the World Health Organization accounts on social media on January 10, 2021. The photo published with the news report showed that the transfer took place through Cham Wings Company, which is on the US sanctions list. [We issued a report](#) in which we condemned the use of this company that supports violence and dictatorship.

² World Health Organization, Basic Documents, Rules of Procedure of the Health Assembly, Rule 80, p.193. https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/pdf_files/BD_49th-en.pdf

III. The Syrian Regime Has Carried Out 544 Attacks on Medical Facilities, Killed 652 Medical Personnel, and Arrested/Disappeared 3,329 Others to Date:

The well-documented history of the Syrian regime's crimes over the past ten years includes the deliberate bombardment of medical facilities, ambulances, and Civil Defense headquarters, the killing of hundreds of medical personnel, the forced disappearance of thousands of others, the hindrance and theft of UN aid, as well as the displacement of millions of Syrians; all of these crimes have contributed to the deterioration of the Syrian people's health conditions to an unprecedented degree. This catalogue of crimes makes the Syrian regime the worst regime on the face of the planet in maintaining the health of the citizens for whose care it is responsible. Many of the Syrian regime's violations have been confirmed by UN reports, such as the reports by [the Independent International Commission of Inquiry](#) and [the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents in northwest Syria](#), as well as those of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which clearly [demonstrated](#) the regime's bombardment of hospitals using chemical weapons, as have dozens of other local and [international human rights reports](#), in addition to investigations by the New York Times and other international and local media.

We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have worked for [over ten years](#) on documenting [violations against the health and medical sector](#) in particular, and have built a database that includes exhaustive documentation of the various types of violations perpetrated; the Syrian regime was and remains by far the main and most prominent perpetrator of almost all these violations.

The following are the most notable violations committed by the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies against the medical sector, according to the SNHR database:

One: 544 attacks on medical facilities:

The SNHR documented at least 544 attacks carried out by the Syrian regime on medical facilities in Syria between March 2011 and June 2021.

We also documented 208 attacks carried out by Russian forces on medical facilities in various Syrian governorates, since Russia's military intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, up until June 2021.

Despite the establishment of [the de-confliction mechanism](#) by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which has operated since September 2014, the United Nations contacted humanitarian organizations operating in northern Syria on June 24, 2020, to notify them that the Russian regime had informed the UN the previous day that it would not participate in the de-confliction mechanism, which the United Nations and its humanitarian partners use to exchange information with parties to the conflict. We note that the SNHR has [documented the Russian forces' targeting of several medical facilities participating in this mechanism](#), in addition to targeting of medical facilities by Syrian regime forces, further confirming that the Syrian regime and Russia are not committed to compliance with any mechanisms or laws, and that they always strive to inflict the greatest harm on civilians.

Two: 652 medical personnel have been killed to date, including 84 due to torture:

The SNHR has documented the deaths of at least 652 medical personnel at the hands of Syrian regime forces between March 2011 and June 2021. Most of these killings were caused by aerial bombardment by helicopters and fixed-wing warplanes, while 84 of them were killed due to torture, including five cases who were identified by their families through [the photos leaked](#) by the former officer who defected from the Syrian regime's military police, known as 'Caesar'³, with these photos of the victims' bodies taken in the Syrian regime's detention centers.

Three: At least 3,329 medical personnel are either detainees or forcibly disappeared:

The SNHR database indicates that [at least 3,329 medical personnel are still arrested/ detained or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime](#), since March 2011 up until June 2021.

We also documented that at least nine of the medical personnel who have been forcibly disappeared in the Syrian regime detention centers have been registered as dead at the civil registry departments in the various Syrian governorates, since the beginning of 2018 up until June 2021.

Four: Theft and control of humanitarian aid:

The Syrian regime's security forces encroach on every aspect of society and the entire state, including humanitarian aid - [an issue we have addressed](#) in [several reports we previously issued](#) - with the regime's security services enforcing a condition on all local partners, whether these are imposed by the Syrian regime or international parties, and on any Syrian citizen who wishes to work with a foreign organization, requiring them to obtain prior approval from the Political Security Division, which must receive all lists of beneficiaries of aid, before allowing any aid to enter; similarly all organizations must obtain the regime's approval before being allowed to distribute any aid to those requiring it; the Syrian regime can and does remove and limit whatever quantities of this aid it wishes and can give or withhold approval for those items it specifically wants. In addition, the regime's security services have numerous other powers, including the power to confiscate (or, more accurately, steal) whatever they want from any consignment of aid donated, which is then sold at markets. [We have previously published](#) a number of [news reports](#) documenting cases where goods and materials bearing the logo of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have been stored in Syrian regime forces' depots, with such blatant misappropriation of aid often taking place in coordination between the security services and staff members working within relief organizations in Syria, mainly those organizations imposed by the Syrian regime (the Red Crescent, Syria Trust for Development, and al Bustan Association). Since the security services are largely in control of the recruitment and approval process for personnel in these relief organizations, it is common for them to employ the children and relatives of heads of senior security services officials or other Syrian regime officials⁴. The security services have also created smaller local organizations, which often limit the provision of assistance to the population in a wide number of areas through these three main major organizations or through the smaller organizations that they have established, combining misappropriation with profiteering, and accordingly, providing these regime officials and beneficiaries with sizable financial returns.

³ Caesar: This is the pseudonym of the officer who defected from the Syrian regime's Military Police in Damascus, who managed to smuggle out and leak thousands of photos of torture victims taken in the regime's detention centers.

⁴ The Guardian, UN hires Assad's friends and relatives for Syria relief operation <<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/28/un-hires-assads-friends-and-relatives-for-syria-relief-operation>>>[25 April 2020]

Five: Recklessness in taking measures to limit the repercussions of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic:

[The repeated targeting of medical facilities and personnel over ten years has exhausted the health sector's](#) ability to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the emergence of the pandemic, the [Syrian regime's government has taken no real and serious measures in line with the instructions of the World Health Organization to limit the spread of the pandemic](#); we talked about this in [a special report](#) we issued on May 8, 2020. The Syrian regime continues to detain 3,329 medical personnel despite a year-and-a-half year-and-a-half having passed since the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged in Syria, with new strains emerging since then, underlining [Syrian society's need for these medics' efforts](#). We have also documented the arrest of more citizens by the Syrian regime, meaning additional overcrowding in the already congested detention centers, another blatant display of negligence in obligating citizens to follow the most basic standards of health care, with the regime even [forcing citizens to attend large gatherings through coercion and threats](#), as happened recently during the latest re-'election' of Bashar al Assad.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations:

- By targeting medical facilities and killing, arbitrarily arresting and forcibly disappearing thousands of Syrian medical personnel, the Syrian regime has violated Article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, as well as violating international human rights law which prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of life, in addition to the right to health, enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Syria is party, which contains a non-derogable core obligation to ensure the right of access to health facilities, goods and services on a non-discriminatory basis.
- The Syrian regime has also flagrantly violated a number of fundamental principles of international human rights law, such as the right to life, non-enforced disappearance, non-torture, the right to health, and a large number of rules of customary humanitarian law. Enforced disappearances and torture practiced by the Syrian regime against medical personnel in the various Syrian governorates, and in relation to their participation in the popular uprising against the regime, constitute a pattern of widespread attacks and amount to crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the Rome Statute.
- Also, as a way of holding the regime accountable for its continued egregious violations, the European Union listed the names of eight ministers from the Syrian regime's new government on the sanctions list on November 6, 2020, including the current Minister of Health, Hasan Ghabbash, who is the Syrian regime's representative at the World Health Organization.
- The information included in this report is supposed to be well known to the World Health Organization (WHO) and all its members; indeed, on March 16 this year, the WHO published a [report on the tenth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria](#), in which it reviewed the situation and suffering of Syrian society after ten years, stating: "[Almost one third of all people - most of them women and children - are still internally displaced in camps or camp-like settlements across the northwest and northeast with limited access to food, shelter, safe drinking-water, health and sanitation services.](#)"
- The presence of a regime such as Syria's on the WHO Executive Board is an insult to the organization and its efforts and to all its employees, as well as a grotesque insult to the medical personnel killed or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime.

- Accordingly, the Syrian regime's candidacy and its appointment without objection from any of the countries that attended the meeting and consequently having its membership of the Executive Board accepted constituted a great shock to the Syrian Network for Human Rights team and to a large number of human rights activists around the world, in addition to hundreds of medical workers in northwest and northeast Syria.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights condemns in the strongest terms the presence of the Syrian regime on the World Health Organization's Executive Board, and condemns the failure of Member States friendly to the Syrian people to object to the regime's candidacy for this position.

Recommendations:

World Health Organization:

- An emergency meeting of the World Health Assembly must be held and a decision must be taken to expel the Syrian regime due to its involvement in crimes against humanity and war crimes against the health sector in Syria.

The Member States, particularly the democracies among them:

- The failure to object to the candidacy of the Syrian regime is an affront to international law, which must be corrected by supporting the holding of a special meeting of the World Health Assembly and demanding that this vote be held again due to the regime's heinous and bloody history.

Human Rights Council and Human Rights organizations:

- Condemn the presence of the Syrian regime, which is involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes, within the WHO Executive Board, and demand its expulsion from the Board as soon as possible.



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